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The Nature Column.

(BY "STUDENT.")

("Student" will be pleased to receive notes on any branch of Natural History. Observations on birds, insects, plants, etc., will be equally welcome. If using a pen-name, will correspondents please enclose real name and address.)

NATURE ROUND LAKE MONOWAI

(Continued.)

At the north-western end, or head of the lake, the Delta Burn flows in. This is the largest feeder the lake is supplied with but the course of the stream is not definitely known. The usual maps of the lake appear to omit a sharp curve or hook at the end of it and it is evident that the country round this point is practically unexplored. The many almost sheer bluffs near the lake edge prohibit traffic at a low altitude but by ascending 4000 or 5000 feet a practicable route seems to be available. The real work would commence when the course turned south-eastward, bending down into the dense bush which clothes the tangled and up-on-end block between the Green Lake and Monowai. This little piece of country between the two lakes is well worth the attention of a geologist. It has the appearance of a gigantic moraine, yet it can hardly be so or the Green Lake would surely find a way through it into the Monowai. The former lake is 1500 or 1600 feet above the latter and the distance between the two is only about two miles, yet the Green Lake empties its water into the Manupouri some twenty miles away!

The Monowai Lake is not a favourite haunt of waterfowl. Ducks are by no means numerous, nor is it to be expected that they would be so, for what suits them best is an expanse of shallow water with low marshy shores just the reverse of the Monowai. In the upper waters of the lake an occasional crested grebe may be seen; a strange solitary bird, not very wild or shy, but wary, and entirely opposed to any close acquaintance. While you are in sight he watches you keenly, not feeding or busying himself with his toilet, as other birds may do, but just floating on the water imperturbably, uttering from time to time a hoarse croak, presumably of disapproval. An odd pair or two of black-backed gulls also frequent the lake. Probably they nest on some bit of shingle somewhere, for the gull breeds in all sorts of places. There is, or was until recently, a nesting place among the scrub or tussock on Seaward Moss. Hundreds of them built in company there at one time. Again, you may find nesting colonies at various points on the coast between Bluecliff and Preservation. But in addition to these colonies single nests may often be found, nests miles away from any other and built, sometimes on a bare mountain peak, and at other times in a gravelly river-bed. These variations in habit are most interesting for it may be from such that new species are in some instances formed. Different ways of life may lead to adaptation to those ways, and the isolation which different habits must entail cannot fail to foster any peculiarity of form or structure which may favour the possessors of such habits.

After getting round the head of the lake there comes the climb on to the Hunter Mountains. This will be best achieved at the saddle between Mounts Cuthbert and Glenhearn. From this saddle a fine view of the Green Lake is obtained. That is, if there is no fog about. And fog there is, at least six times out of ten. But if the rambler's luck holds good and the day is clear he will see one of the prettiest of all our small lakes. The scene will probably remind him of some parts of Stewart Island; there is just the same pleasing effect of bush-clad hill and bay. The Monowai is not a particularly beautiful piece of water—its unbroken line of steep forest-covered shore is somewhat monotonous—but the Green Lake, and its unnamed smaller sister lying to the north, are well worth a visit from a scenic point of view alone.

Almost due west from the saddle lies the fine mountain of Glenhearn. It is a very interesting peak to explore, formed like a huge crescent with lakelet or tarn lying between the horns. The eastern half of the crescent, for about half a mile, is known as the staircase, or, to give it the full title, the Devil's Staircase. The name is significant, it is a narrow ridge topped with great masses of broken rock; pretty steep climbing, but not in any way dangerous, except at one point where care is necessary, the track being narrowed to a matter of inches and everlasting smash waiting on either side some thousand feet below. But there is good footing and handhold and only absolute recklessness could result in disaster.

THE HOUSE THAT HUGGINS BUILT.

(Continued from Page Two.)

bit of luck, I'm going to get married!" "That will be a bit of luck for you, Paddy," Hug said. "I didn't think there was a girl in Dugboro' to take the risk."

"All right, Hug," grinned Podsnap. "I can afford to take a joke. The main trouble old boy, was getting a house to live in. You know the difficulty, don't you?" And he gave Hug a playful dig. "Well, her old father has turned up trumps. He sprung it on us last night. He has bought a house to give us as a wedding present!"

And Podsnap guffawed like the fatuous ass he is.

"Where is the house, Paddy?" asked Hug.

"We don't know yet, old son. That's half the fun."

"All the fun, perhaps," said Hug.

"And the lady's name?"

"It's a pretty one, Huggy: Arabella Snoodle!"

And then Hug laughed. His smile spread until it reached round behind his ears. He caught hold of the acacia tree to steady himself and let out melodious gurgles of mirth. He opened his jaws and roared until the echoes ricocheted over the Dugboro' hills.

"Funny, ain't it?" grinned Podsnap. "Sorry I can't stop."

Hug didn't want him to stop. He was quite content to wait until Podsnap moved in. But Pod was a wily bird, and he wasn't going to let Huggins have the laugh of him if he could help it. You can guess that he gnashed his teeth some when he found what villa it was that old Snoodle had bought for him and his blushing bride. But he took the rise out of Hug by moving in during the night, when the family next door were comfortably tucked up in bed.

Hug grinned over the fence at Podsnap next morning.

"Nice little show, ain't it?" he said.

"Sorry I forgot to put a window in the dining-room, old man. My mistake. How do you like going to the village pump for water?"

Podsnap grinned in response; he had thought it all out.

"Matter of fact, Huggy, old boy, finest thing that could have happened. Running along to the pump gives me a bit of exercise. Just what I want! Suits me down to the ground. And what's more, the missis is delighted with the place, Fact."

Of course, Podsnap was putting the best face he could on the matter, but judging by the number of times Mrs Pod came into the garden with her hair out of curl, and the language she used to her beloved when she was inside, things weren't so rosy.

Pod was so fed up with it after a couple of months that Huggins began to get nervous about his sanity. It was about that time that a sleek-looking stranger came along and began to linger. He leaned over the front fence and watched Pod sowing seeds for a bit.

"Nice house of yours, mister? Bit out of the common."

"It is," said Pod; "a bit too much out of the common for me."

"I'm looking for one like it, said the stranger. "How much?"

Podsnap thought a reasonable figure to ask would be ninepence, but, assuming that the stranger might be a mug of the Snoodle brand, he said he would sell it for a thousand pounds.

"Too high, pard," said the other; "but it takes my fancy some."

That was good enough for Podsnap to invite him inside. When the stranger actually offered to buy the house for seven hundred pounds, Podsnap nearly had a fit. Of course, he guessed it was all a bluff, with Huggins somewhere behind it.

It wasn't, though! The sleek person called on the next day with the money in bank-notes, and Podsnap signed the transfer in a dream. The Dugboro' bank pronounced the notes good, and the Podsnaps hustled their furniture out in high glee, and went to live in clover at the "Red Dog Hotel" in the High Road.

"Seven hundred, Hug! Don't you wish you'd kept it, old man?"

Podsnap laughed until the ornaments on the shelves rattled.

Huggins said that the sleek stranger's keeper would come along in a day or two, and Pod would have to disgorge his ill-gotten gains.

That didn't happen. What did happen was the arrival of a couple of house-breakers, who started, under the direction of the new owner, to reduce the house to a heap of ruins. Podsnap and Huggins watched from a safe shelter and looked at each other at intervals. Guesser goes on, wasn't it? Fancy a man paying seven hundred pounds for a house and then pulling it to bits!

"We'll have that chap's keeper here in

a day or two," said Hug. "He's mad. Unless, old man, he's going to rebuild it to suit his own fancy. Maybe he wants it with the sun on the other side."

That wasn't the reason either. A contractor came and carted away most of the debris, leaving Hug's old plot fairly clear.

Of course, the mystery made Huggins and Podsnap close friends. It was only a mystery that could have made them close friends now, all things considered. Pod used to come round to Hug's house and sit up late talking it over, and wondering what the game was.

They found out one night. It was about one o'clock in the morning, to be correct. They'd just emptied the flowing bowl and were exchanging affectionate farewells when a motor van drove up. Hug took a peep from the side window and beckoned his friend. It was a bright moonlight night, and there was Hug's neighbour, with a few friends, and they had pickaxes and spades; and they were digging under the foundations of Hug's plot for all they were worth.

"They're starting the Channel Tunnel, old man," said Pod.

"Digging for water, perhaps," said Hug.

They were both wrong. After an hour of it Hug's neighbour hauled out a bag and emptied it. Hug and Pod held on to one another and gasped. The bag was full of silver plate. Up came more bags out of the soil, and they disgorged jewellery and watches. More bags, full of curios and priceless ornaments!

"Hidden treasure!" gasped Hug. "Oh, Pod!"

"And I sold it for seven hundred! I gave it away."

Huggins and his friend had to hold on to one another for fear of collapsing at the sight of so much wealth. By the time they were able to go, Hug's neighbour had tooltled off with the whole lot of it in the motor van.

It was a week later that ex-Inspector Grippal looked into say how-do, and heard the news. His hair stood on end.

"Sleek looking chap, with a sharp nose, was he?"

"The same!" said Pod and Hug together.

"It was Flash Fred!" said Grippal. "Just been released after doing a three years' stretch for burglary. He'd buried the swag there, you can bet, and, as soon as he was out, he came back for it. Well, if that ain't hard luck! Wish I'd known about it a bit sooner."

So did Huggins, on his own account, and Podsnap, too, privately.

As Huggins says, in the intervals between kicking himself, if he'd only have made the foundations of that house of his a bit deeper, he might have been a rich man by now.

(The End.)

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